

# Why You Must Forgive When a Spiritual Leader Abuses His Position

"On behalf of \*Dismal Church, I apologize. Pastor \*Richard's actions in no way reflect the church body. He misled you, misused you and abused you," \*Mary said.

With that, my suspicions were confirmed. The church merger we were working on was a bait and switch. We had worked on it daily for more than a year to the point where it was nearly emotionally suffocating.

Balancing several jobs and daily meetings with Richard, I put friends and some family functions to the side. I believed in the vision and direction of my church and in the promises he made to me. And I trusted Richard. He was an older pastor who could no longer travel much nor attend to his parishioners.

He tried to act like a loving father to me and enjoyed my company. It was apparent he was lonely and depressed. He said he wanted to retire and his church was largely neglected by him for years.

The small congregation could barely make their monthly payments as fundraising was always based on crisis (looking back now, I could see he thrived on and created crisis as he was "needed" in these times). The only thing keeping the ministry going in the tired facility was an educational program, but its families didn't attend the church.

I thought his promises were true, as we were friends. However, when we committed wholeheartedly to this process, someone did warn me saying she has seen many relationships between Pastor Richard and others ruined.

In fact, I was the fifth person or so in 10 years Richard had promised the ministry and facility to. The previous one was his son, but that ended badly—the details of which he kept from me until I had to investigate it myself.

For the merger process, we used Warren Bird and Jim Tomberlin's book *Better Together*. But due to Richard's "disability," I made Cliff Notes for him, which he allegedly read. Our two congregations began combined services and God started moving in power and grace. And even the attendance grew dramatically. The needy community surrounding the church was excited, there was movement taking place!

As we made progress, red flags started popping up, but I dismissed them. And he saw a few members of his church not as people, but as dollar signs to give toward his short-term missions overseas. When I saw this behavior, I shrugged it off, but looking back, I realize this is one way he saw me.

There was severe financial mismanagement, and my church paid his church's electrical bill as they were given notice their power would be cut off in a few days. And there were letters from the IRS where back taxes were due but also several ministries and personal accounts were intermixed with the church's funds. And the education program meeting in the church treated Dismal Church like tenants instead of the other way around. Out of desperation, both groups tolerated each other. And in our combined church services, the suspicions and toxicity could be felt. But I honestly thought we could bring life, hope, vision and direction to that needy and broken community. And that blinded me to truth.

Staff meetings led by Richard lacked vision and direction becoming toxic the more we looked at the books. In fact, someone on his staff yelled at us in a meeting for a particular "look" and "lacking faith." Things became bizarre and more abusive and spiritually manipulative by Richard. He would use the right words, masking them in spirituality. I

kick myself to this day, asking myself, *Why did I tolerate such abuse?* Sometimes, ministry vision can blind you from reality.

And when we got a lawyer to make sure the property acquisition went smoothly, Richard cut off all ties to me overnight, even though he was informed, and we agreed this was part of the process. The process Richard agreed to and mapped out by the both of us from *Better Together* even showed this step.

It was then that I saw he had done this to many other people before. Only wanting to pull the strings and control people, Richard was a narcissist who destroyed most close relationships but wanted to control the narratives. I saw that prior church members set boundaries up around Richard, but he always acted like the victim.

It was apparent when we retained the lawyer that Richard didn't want the issues with the finances and building exposed. He only wanted control and was caught in his lies. He was dead on the inside, leading a dying church to a slow death.

He only wanted my church body to revitalize his ministry, making him look good. As Mary revealed, he wanted to keep controlling us and making promises, carrying us along as he pulled the strings. But the moment we got a lawyer, his true intentions were revealed.

I tried to pick up the pieces, apologizing to everyone in my church. Then, I was limping my remaining church body along as he kicked us out overnight soon after Mary met with me. But because of the emotional duress and abuse we underwent, we chose an end-date for my fellowship. We loved our remaining church body well and forgave Richard immediately.

Yet honestly, it still hurts. The good news is healing can take place progressively. Even though I, among many others, will never receive an apology from Richard, who is blind to his spiritual prison.

Richard is still there, pulling the strings as his church body can't do anything about his actions because his bylaws give him absolute authority. His "boards" and committees are still set up just to keep the small body happy, thinking they have some say in his church. I'm hoping he is not currently doing the same thing of stringing people along and trying to manipulate. I pray he has learned from his past and historical failures.

A friend of mine who worked with Richard on occasion asked, "Jared, you're a discerning person; how did you not sense he was doing that?" I couldn't answer it at that time, but after reflecting on it my response would be, "He smothered me and loved me, spiritually manipulated me by promising mission and vision to me. But how do you not sense his manipulations because he does the same thing to everyone, including you?"

Another friend who was part of my church has asked a few times if I'll ever start another church. Quite honestly, my hopes and dreams for a church that plants churches were shattered and stolen. The desire flew away after we were chewed up by the mess that is Pastor Richard, being added to his long list of ruined relationships for the sake of his "ministry."

Why am I writing this? Probably because it's part of the healing process. And also to help someone who might be reading this.

Maybe you have gone through similar ministry ventures, or you have had a spiritual leader mislead you and abuse you in one way or another. There are many Pastor Richards out there. And, if you're in a similar situation, get out quickly.

However, I hope you can forgive. I know you won't forget, and your healing takes time. But you can also learn from it as I have.

There is more to write about my lessons in this process I went through. But what is your story? How did you heal or how are

you healing? Or, are you still hurting or stuck? Are you currently being manipulated and abused in a church and what are you going to do about it before it goes from bad to worse and there are more casualties?

Please, share your story and insights with me if you'd like. Email me at [jared@](mailto:jared@)

\* The names have been changed, but the story is true.

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